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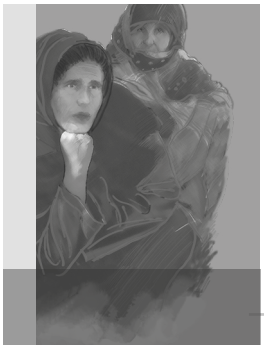

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1. Introduction

Western Sahara continues in a situation of prolonged and largely forgotten conflict. Colonized first by Spain –from the late 19th century– it was later occupied by Morocco, from 1975 until the present time. The Sahrawi people are still denied their right to self-determination and their country remains one of the world's 17 Non-Self Governing Territories (and the only one in Africa). Although its decolonization should have happened according to a referendum and under the auspices of the United Nations in 1975, that same year Morocco began the military invasion of Sahrawi territory via the northeastern border, and on the 6th of November undertook what became known as the "Green March" by which 350,000 Moroccans came south, occupying the country. This event, known by the Sahrawi people as the "Black March", marked the beginning of the exodus of thousands of Sahrawis to the desert, fleeing the killings, enforced disappearances, detentions, torture and bombardments by the Moroccan forces. The people who fled and survived reached Tindouf, in Algeria, when they settled in refugee camps.

Morocco's invasion from the north was followed by the invasion by Mauritania from the south, as well as the signing of the Tripartite Agreements, or Madrid Agreements, on the 14th of November, by which Spain agreed to leave Western Sahara and enable its division between Morocco and Mauritania. These events triggered a war between these two countries and the Polisario Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro, formed in 1973. On the 27th of February, 1976, the Polisario Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and formed a government-in-exile in Tindouf. After the withdrawal of Mauritania from Sahrawi territory, the war continued between the Polisario Front and Morocco until 1991, when a ceasefire was achieved between the two parties. The agreement included holding a self-determination referendum and the implementation of a United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (referred to by its Spanish initials, MINURSO) with the goal of supervising it.

This referendum has not yet been held because of the consistent obstructions by Morocco and the complicity of the United Nations and of various countries, including France and Spain, in particular. During these decades, Morocco has consolidated its occupation and exploitation of the natural resources of Western Sahara. Since the Green March, the Moroccan regime has promoted

a policy of incentives –the building of houses and job offers– to encourage Moroccan colonists to settle in Western Sahara. This strategy has had a huge socio-demographic and cultural impact and has created a situation in which the Sahrawi population has become a minority in its own country[2].

For nearly five decades now, the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara has been based on the repression of the Sahrawi people, and the refugee population of Tindouf is still unable to return[3]. During this time, serious human rights violations have been a constant, and include: extrajudicial executions; enforced disappearance; arbitrary detention and imprisonment; torture; sexual violence; abduction, threats; persecution; intimidation; harassment; raids; physical abuse; plunder and destruction of property; restrictions to freedom of movement, association, expression, demonstration and information; and violations of economic, social and cultural rights.

This diagnosis focusses on the analysis of the political violence carried out by Morocco against Sahrawi women in the context of the occupation, the impacts of this violence and the needs for psychosocial support identified based on the testimonies of survivors. As part of the repression, violence against women, particularly political activists and those who defend the rights of Sahrawis, has been and is a common practice. Violence affects every dimension of their lives and, despite the seriousness of the effects, survivors have not been able to tackle it or work through it in terms of mental health and from an integrated psychosocial rehabilitation perspective.

2 In 2014, of the 530,000 inhabitants of occupied Western Sahara, 180,000 (34%) were Moroccan soldiers, 245,000 Moroccan civilians (46%) and 105,000 Sahrawis (20%). In the refugee camps in Tindouf it was estimated that there were over 170,000 people, while in the territories liberated during the war and under the control of the Polisario Front a figure of about 49,000 was calculated. Lastly, about 50,000 people constituted the Sahrawi diaspora, located particularly in Europe (Martin Beristain and Etxeberria Gabilondo, 2014). According to the United Nations, in 2020 the population of Western Sahara was 612,000 people, although there is no precise information about its current demographical composition (see: https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsgt)

3 This situation has not changed since the ceasefire was broken on the 13th of November, 2020, in Guerguerat, in the south of Western Sahara, triggered by a dispersal by the Moroccan armed forces of the Sahrawi population, which had been demonstrating in the area since the 20th of October, and to which the Polisario Front responded by attacking Moroccan army positions.

We are aware that it is difficult to reflect and summarise the depth of the individual and collective harm that has been caused to Sahrawi women in just a few pages. Even so, we aim to present some key elements so that international cooperation and solidarity can prioritise the psychosocial rehabilitation of the victims of Moroccan repression as an essential dimension of working for human rights in Western Sahara. Our final goal, then, is to lay the foundations for actions that can counteract the damage caused by the violence and strengthen Sahrawi women in their political commitment.

2. Methodology

This analysis is based essentially on two previous studies. Firstly, the report *In Occupied Land. Memory and Resistance of Women in Western Sahara* (Mendia Azkue and Guzmán Orellana, 2016), published by Hegoa together with the Basque Network for the Support of Sahrawi Women and with the support of Euskal Fondoa–Association of Basque Cooperating Organizations[4]. It is a qualitative study based on group interviews carried out over the course of various days in Laayoune with a total of 40 women, as well as two individual interviews and the analysis of documentary sources. This study reconstructs their collective memory as women who have been the victims of serious human rights violations, but also their path as the protagonists of a prolonged history of resistance by the Sahrawi people against the occupation and for independence[5].

4 The Basque Network for the Support of Sahrawi Women, promoted by the Alava Friends of the SADR Association, comprises organizations dedicated to supporting the Sahrawi people, the equality offices of several municipal councils, and institutions such as Euskal Fondoa, Emakunde and Eudel–Association of Basque Municipalities.

5 There have been a number of publications, promoted by Basque cooperation, on the subject of human rights violations in occupied Western Sahara, for example: *Breve crónica de un viaje a los territorios ocupados* (Asociación de Amigos y Amigas de la RASD de Álava, 2008), *La situación de los derechos humanos en los territorios ocupados del Sáhara Occidental. Responsabilidades de Marruecos, de la comunidad internacional y corporativas* (Oskoz and Chacón, 2008) and a Hegoa study based on interviews in occupied Sahara and the Tindouf camps, published as *The Oasis of Memory. Historical Memory and Human Rights Violations in the Western Sahara* (Martin Beristain and González Hidalgo, 2013)

Our work is based, secondly, on the results of the report *Let Everything Come to Light. Human Rights Violations of Women in Occupied Western Sahara (1975-2021)* (Hegoa, 2022), carried out collaboratively between a Sahrawi team located in Laayoune and an Hegoa team, and which was also supported by Euskal Fondoa. This study, which had a greater scope than the previous one, was based on 81 testimonies by Sahrawi women victims of violence perpetrated by the Moroccan regime, with ages ranging between 12 and 73 years of age, and who took a survey and an in-depth interview. The study reflects patterns of systematic, uninterrupted and unpunished violence against them since the beginning of the occupation. The majority of the testimonies collected in this text, as well as the references to quantitative data, proceed from that report.

3. Principal human rights violations

The Sahrawi women interviewed have been the victims of all kinds of violence in the context of the occupation. Each one had suffered on average over six kinds of serious human rights violations since 1975, and the majority (69%) reported between seven and nine. The violence described in their testimonies included violations of the right to life; torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishments; sexual violence; violations of liberty and personal security; and violations of economic, social and cultural rights (Hegoa, 2022).

In terms of **violations of the right to life**, for example, a number of the women interviewed had been present at the extrajudicial killing of relatives or acquaintances, normally at clandestine detention centres. A third of them had been the direct victims of **enforced disappearance**, whether as children, adolescents or adults, for periods ranging between several months and up to 16 years.

> *I was abducted in 1987. Two men dressed as soldiers came and told me they were from Security and they wanted to ask some questions for two or three minutes... As soon as I got into the car, one grabbed my hair and put my head between my legs, and then I realized that it wouldn't be two minutes, but rather days, or even an enforced disappearance, just like*

that of my grandmother and many other people who have been gone since 1975. I saw very quickly that this was going to be my fate.

I suffered a crime against humanity, which is enforced disappearance; I was 20; they detained me on the 21st of November 1987 until the 18th of June 1991. (...) They locked me up without any trial and my family was looking for me but without a reply.

In the context of their detention and disappearance, the women were submitted to **torture**. The physical forms that this took, according to the testimonies, were blows, corporal punishments, burns and cuts, hanging in extreme positions, different kinds of asphyxiation (using bags or by immersion), electric shocks, forced labour, the use of animals (dogs, snakes), the use of toxic substances, mutilations and subjection to extreme temperatures. The combination of these methods has been a frequent practice against Sahrawi women, as some of the testimonies have shown.

They put me in a room that looked like a butcher's; there were hooks and chains everywhere. There was a bed for tying people down. They tied me to that bed and they started to pour foul water on my face, and another person took a whip and hit the soles of my feet and my thighs, until I lost consciousness. They stopped for a moment and then they started again with the same tortures. There were 11 of us women in that situation, the only thing you could hear were cries, sobs and groans of pain. They hung us up and electrocuted us, sometimes on the ears, other times on the lips... When they were tired of these methods they brought a stick, they put it under your knees, they joined your hands behind your back and they hung you upside down for an hour or two, which was so painful that you were sorry you had been born. Then they tied you to the bed again and they put it up on one end, with your head facing down. They made you swallow that foul water, until your stomach was full of that water, and then they jumped on it, and with their hands they pressed your stomach until you vomited all that water... it was a miserable situation... There were two months of continuous torture, and if they let us rest for a day, they came the next to continue the tortures.

With regard to the forms of **psychological torture**, there have proved to have been many of these and they have caused high levels of psychological and

emotional disturbance among the women interviewed. These forms include: insults; threats to them or their families; being compelled to witness or listen to the torture of others; deprivation of sleep, food or personal hygiene facilities; overcrowding; solitary confinement; isolation; and slander. In this case, the methods have also been applied in combination, with the goal of intensifying their effects in terms of destabilizing the mental and emotional states of the victims.

> *They punished us, they didn't let us sleep. They wouldn't let us go to the toilet; every time we asked they refused, we couldn't do what we needed to do.*
>
> *I was alone, in a very small cell, for two years and six months.*
>
> *[In prison] I had long hair and it started to fall out. They brought me a bag to collect the bloody locks that fell from my head. They took that bag to my mother, who thought they had killed me. It was a way of torturing her as well, psychologically. [Years later, after getting out of prison], she told me that since they took her that bag with my stained clothing and my hair, she began to suffer inside in a way that she could not get over, she was sure they had killed me. She also told me that they had taken her some pills that she had never seen. And that the police told her that they were pills that prostitutes take, and that I had been a prostitute. She told me that they shattered her, that they had destroyed her dignity.*

The **sexual violence** committed by the Moroccan security forces is another of the serious human rights violations suffered by Sahrawi women in the occupied territories. Often, these kinds of violations have been hinted at but not made explicit in the testimony, given the many (personal, family, social and cultural) implications that reporting them usually brings. Among those factors that stand in the way of women talking about it, it is possible to mention: fear, shame, being afraid of being blamed, and/or the harm that might be caused to their family and social status due to the stigma linked to this violence (Mendia Azkue and Guzmán Orellana, 2016). The women talk about some of these difficulties in the following terms:

> *There are also [rapes] here and we don't talk about them out of fear. The silence is because they think that they will be held responsible. It's important to see how we can make this visible here, in our history, and*

for it not to be forgotten. And also technically how to document it and do it properly.

Here we can't talk about sexual violence. We can't talk about ourselves or this type of thing because of our religion and culture.

As a result, sexual crimes have had much less visibility than others. However, we have observed that, over time, reporting them has become more frequent, which makes it possible to begin to measure their extent, and how systematic they are as part of Morocco's repressive policies. For example, 68% of the women interviewed for the study *Let Everything Come to Light* (Hegoa, 2022) reports incidents of sexual violence happening since the beginning of the occupation and occurring in different forms, for example: groping and touching, forced nudity, verbal aggression and/or jokes with a sexual content, blows and/or electric shocks to the breasts and/or genitals, rape, threats of rape of them or their relatives, torture during pregnancy, forced miscarriage, forced sexual photographs, sexual mutilation and forced sterilization. The three periods for which the greatest number of incidents of sexual violence were reported are: 1985-1989 (17%), 2005-2009 (17%) and, particularly, from 2015 (25%).

At the interrogations they used the opportunity to grope us, and they also threatened to rape us.

At the demonstrations, when they hit us they always go to sensitive parts of the woman's body. This treatment is so cruel and humiliating... On more than one occasion, right in the street they have taken off a person's melhfa *by force, before the eyes of all those present in the street. They go for the parts of the body that I cannot mention here... If they get to grips with you in the alleys, imagine the worst, because they will do anything to you.*

They started to interrogate us, which means 'question-torture-question-torture'. They sat me on a cold, wet floor; one asked me and the other, if he didn't like my answer, hit me, and blow after blow, on one side and on the other, first with his hand and then with an iron bar. I was a minor, I wasn't even 18, I was the youngest in that group. They kicked me between the legs, in my private parts, and with the baton on my backside, and also between my legs. I suffered a lot of pain because of those blows down

there; they hit me intentionally in my private parts. It was a long time before I could go back to high school.

I have suffered harassments, attempted rape, sexual harassment; they have taken my clothes off and touched me all over my body, on my private parts. (...) There was a girl aged 13, it was terrible to hear how she screamed and cried; we had our eyes blindfolded, you could only hear the voices and the screams of that girl, it made my hair stand on end, I couldn't go to her aid. I suffered more for her than for me, not being able to stop them touching her.

They hit me so often on the side that I suffered a miscarriage. They hit me in the breasts and on the stomach, and as a result, the child was born dead.

In prison I saw them rape two Sahrawi women. They tried to rape all of us. (...) There are many things that I cannot tell. (...) The carried out an operation on me in the prison and as a result I didn't menstruate again. They did a tubal ligation and I haven't menstruated from then to now.

As part of the repression, Sahrawi women have experienced daily **violations of liberty and personal security**. The testimonies regarding being followed and watched, restrictions on liberty of expression, meeting, movement and information, and physical abuse during demonstrations or protests reveal the high level of persecution that they are subject to, particularly those who are politically active. Furthermore, the women report other serious crimes against them, such as abduction and arbitrary detentions, raids on and the destruction of homes, seizure or confiscation of property (homes, personal belongings or animals), as well as defamation and attacks on their privacy and their reputation (with a strongly sexist emphasis) via the social media, with the aim of humiliating them and isolating them from their social surroundings. In addition, within the general framework of the end of the ceasefire since November 2020, and in the particular context of obligatory confinement introduced by Morocco due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an intensification of the repression against the Sahrawi people has occurred.

They have banned all members [of the organization] from going out and meeting each other; we are organizing a new political project and they want to stop it, to bring it down, to stop us from meeting at all cost. We

are under siege in our own homes and we are not permitted to visit our families and neighbours; we are confined but it is a political confinement, not because of the pandemic, but because of our ideology. Even now, with me talking to you. We are under the microscope 24 hours a day; I receive threats every day, and my children, my husband, my whole family. Threats at my home, outside of it and everywhere.

At the rallies they always beat us, they maltreat us, we get beaten with batons at all of them.

After Gdeim Izik, our houses were searched and totally destroyed, our furniture and our belongings, even the smallest things. The police and the army allowed our houses to be plundered.

They defame us on the social media and pirate the websites we have, they publish pornography on our websites, they write a lot of articles to defame us, where they say that we are prostitutes, mercenaries and many other things. I can't comment on anything, because as soon as I do, I start to get threats through Facebook and to my phone.

Morocco's repression in occupied Western Sahara also includes an active policy of socio-economic exclusion of the Sahrawi population. In this regard, the women interviewed related experiences of discrimination or harassment in the workplace, bans for them or their relatives on working, unstable working conditions, unjustified dismissal, salary freezing, permits being refused, withdrawal of state payments and being deprived of the means of subsistence. These are some of the types of **economic and labour rights violations** that affect them and which result in a critical financial situation: for example, 59% have no monthly income, 23% earn between 1 and 200 Euros and only 10% earn over 200 Euros.

In occupied Western Sahara we cannot work in equal conditions. Those Sahrawis who are not involved in political matters are not treated the same when it comes to work, and so imagine if we are activists... We do not dream of working under the Moroccan regime.

In terms of the **violation of social rights**, the women report situations of discrimination or refusal of medical attention at health centres. Given their distrust and fear of the Moroccan medical system, many resort to traditional

Sahrawi medicine. At schools, discrimination and harassment are frequent, with cases of expulsions, punishments, falsifications of marks, refusal of grants and being forced to leave school. This situation is reflected in the data regarding their educational levels, for example: 28% have no formal education, 17% have completed primary school, 17% secondary, and 11% have a baccalaureate, and only 14% have university studies.

> *We have grown up without access to anything, stigmatized by the colonists, and by the children of the colonists, by the Moroccan staff at the schools and by the government workers in the offices; they fail us, they give us very low marks, we cannot choose the degree course we want. I am on the black list of young people who cannot get grants because we are the children of activists and because of our own activism.*

The **violation of cultural rights** is mentioned frequently by the women interviewed. For example, they state that it forms a part of their everyday lives: the ban on setting up *haimas* (the traditional Sahrawi home), the prohibition of any Sahrawi national symbols, threats and harassment for wearing traditional clothing, the prohibition on registering Sahrawi names, or harassment for speaking in Hassaniya. These prohibitions, in addition to the suppression, folklorization and/or negation of the Sahrawi history and identity constitute strategies within the Moroccan project aimed at the forced assimilation and cultural ethnocide of Western Sahara, in which schools play a vital role.

> *Morocco's goal is young people, and the consequence of all that is ignorance. Morocco wants to keep the Sahrawi people in the occupied territories in ignorance. (...) Here at school, every day at 8 in the morning they oblige you to sing the Moroccan national anthem. We see how we have also been occupied culturally.*

One final and important figure in this summary of patterns of violence against Sahrawi women is that the large majority (75%) can identify those responsible. They indicate different Moroccan security forces: the police (64%), intelligence services (25%), auxiliary forces (18%), the army (11%) and the gendarmerie (7%). The women report combined operations by these forces, as well as the fact that often the Moroccan agents operate in civilian clothing. It is also striking that the majority of them (69%) know the identity,

either by their real name or by a nickname, of the direct perpetrators, many of whom continue to live in occupied Western Sahara in total impunity. Another noteworthy figure is the number of women who point to the responsibility of Moroccan civilians (21%). These civilians are people who collaborate actively with the occupation forces; in a more permanent way, workers at schools, health centres and the offices of the Moroccan administration, and on a more occasional basis those who participate in actions against the liberty of movement, association and demonstration; raids and vandalism; and pillage of the property of the Sahrawi population.

4. Effects of the violence

The Sahrawi women interviewed describe many physical impacts, including injuries, fractures, chronic pain in different parts of the body, and a range of illnesses (for example, stomach problems, rheumatism, high blood pressure, etc.). As a direct result of the violence, some women suffer physical and sensory disabilities (in terms of mobility, of sight) and others mention a loss of fertility.

The psychological and emotional impacts of the violence are equally numerous. As well as **pain resulting from the absence** of loved ones who have been killed, have disappeared, or are imprisoned, the Sahrawi women report living with fear and stress; feelings of anguish, worry and uncertainty; depression; and recurring negative thoughts. Other effects appear as strongly associated with sexual violence, such as the loss of self-esteem and feelings of shame. Although less frequently, some also mention suicidal thoughts and having their life project cut short. It is usual that these effects have had physical repercussions and are manifested, among other forms, in sleep disturbances (insomnia, nightmares), food disorders (particularly loss of appetite), and feelings of distress.

> *The material things that we have lost can be regained, but the most important, such as those disappeared and murdered, that is what hurts us the most. They have us living in a constant state of terror and fear. Still today I live in fear. Sometimes I imagine those policemen following me; I see them on the wall and I see that they are going to trap me and*

abduct me. Now I am afraid of everything; I don't meet other people much; I don't talk to anyone; it is if I am in a constant depression. I live with terror.

When they took my son I made banners and wrote letters, and I delivered them; but there is no justice; I have been afraid; I have many injuries and this causes fear, insomnia, pain in my soul...

Everything I have experienced, the torture, seeing my relatives die under torture, prison... it still marks me; what has happened to me I cannot assimilate; every night I remember it again, and I see the image of my cousin who died under torture. It was very hard.

I don't like to talk about it, because every time I do I can hardly breathe…

That [sexual violence] is very humiliating, it humiliates your dignity, it lowers your spirits and your self-esteem, it damages your pride.

I was 14, it was terrible for me, a minor, and I didn't know much; I felt dirty and my concern was about pride and what would be said by my loved ones and my family, which is conservative; in our culture it is seen very badly that a woman or a child suffer that kind of harassment.

The threats of rape and the sexual harassment affected me a great deal, mentally. For a time I wasn't sleeping at night, I couldn't sleep. (...) There are people who suffered rape and they kept silent about it, because of our society and how important virginity is in it, they were scared of the shame they would experience in society.

What affected me most was the sterilization they subjected me to; that was the cause of all the ills that I suffer from.

The Sahrawi women interviewed talked about the effects of violence within the **family sphere**, especially the following: the impact of the absence of loved ones who had been the victims of reprisals; family separation caused by forced displacement and seeking refuge; and the suffering of those women whose children were political prisoners in Moroccan prisons. Those who had survived the experience of forced disappearance-detention also discuss the pain of family separation. The majority indicate the way in which the repression fell not only on them, but also on their relatives, including their

children, in retribution for their activism. Consistently mentioned are the consequences of the violence on how they carried out their role as mothers, and on the family structure; and this has meant that some have had to live with feelings of impotence, frustration or guilt, and which has brought to others additional responsibilities in terms of care.

When we knew for sure that the Moroccans had come to stay, my family decided to get out of the occupied areas; they had to go to the refugee camps. I suffered greatly from loss, separation from my husband and later separation from my family. It was a great suffering to be left alone in such a short time. I became like most women, with a new-born girl without a father and without grandparents.

Some things I will never, ever forget. At the time of my arrest, the screams of my son [nursing] during that struggle; I tried to stay with my son and the soldiers pulled at him, and it is an image that I will die with. The image of my family, when the soldiers took me out; my mother being held up by other people so as not to fall, my younger sisters, with their arms folded, watching the scene, and my father to one side, in a corner of the house. That image will be with me always; it is an image of pain and impotence. I spent 16 years disappeared-detained.

Is there anything harder that having to leave your children without shelter, unprotected?

Apart from the physical abuse, there is a psychological factor that affects you very much. When you get home you find your children are desperate, because they don't know if you were going to come home or not after going out, particularly my younger daughters.

I still have pain in my shoulder, my back hurts, my head hurts; but it is the psychological wounds, they are the ones that do not get any better. (...) My wounds rise up, I am depressed, I cannot sleep properly, it is chronic insomnia; I feel responsible for my children, I am their mother and also their deceased father, sister, grandfather and father-in-law.

Most women make reference to an impoverishment and deterioration of their material living conditions as a result of the violence, linked to factors

such as: the absence (due to killing, disappearance, imprisonment or forced displacement) of family members who were breadwinners for their families; the physical and psychological after-effects of the torture, which have incapacitated them, or relatives on whom they depend, for work; the Moroccan policies of economic and labour market exclusion of the Sahrawi population; and/or the financial costs of repression for families with political prisoners.

Other impacts of the violence indicated in the testimonies include social stigma and isolation. The repression, in that it seeks to extend terror, mistrust and polarisation socially, has direct effects on family and social links, and in the end some of these links can suffer or even be broken.

5. Mechanisms for coping and needs for psychosocial support in the face of violence

The socio-political situation in Western Sahara has hardly changed since the beginning of the military occupation, and so the collective trauma that affects the Sahrawi population is persistent. "The trauma is not rooted in a violent and acute moment that breaks out, but occurs within a historical social context. Therefore, the traumatic experience becomes more chronic and the roots become deeper if the social situation does not change" (Minoletti, 2005: 69).

What is more, impunity is a factor that clearly contributes to the persistence and worsening of harm for the victims of occupation. Despite the fact that the large majority of the women have formally reported the incidents to different authorities, and despite the high degree to which the direct perpetrators can be identified, no members of Moroccan security forces or Moroccan colonists involved in the violence have been tried, and so there is total impunity. The victims have seen how their right to justice has been totally denied and they find themselves with a very serious lack of legal protection. With regard to the State violence, the impunity "increases the feeling of vulnerability and defencelessness among the population and fear that violent actions can reoccur. This situation not only reproduces indefinitely the harm caused, but also makes it more serious, reaching all the spheres in which the

victims move (economic, political and social) and at the individual, group, psychological and social levels" (Lira [1991], in Paz Bailey, 2012: 87).

In these circumstances of continuing occupation, impunity and chronic harm, the Sahrawi women have not had any access to mental health services or to psychosocial support processes. As we have seen, their experiences with Moroccan health institutions have been very negative, due to discrimination or exclusion in terms of attention, as well as a mistrust of the medical staff. Together with this, some women refer to economic instability as something that limits their ability to obtain medical attention or pay for the medication (for example, sleeping pills or antidepressants) on which they depend.

> *How can I recover from all this? We are still suffering from it, we continue to live under occupation, we live in pain and we endure it, nothing more; we have not recovered. (...) We are here, excluded from everything, here there is no support, no psychologists, everything requires money and we have nothing. (...) There have never been any reparations, and they have never asked about what happened to us.*

Given the situation described, during these decades the Sahrawi women in the occupied territories have resorted to various strategies in order to survive and to try to counter, at least to an extent, the impacts of the violence. The ones they mention most are the following: taking refuge in their faith in God and in religion; focusing on guaranteeing the well-being of their families; having the emotional and material support of their families and friendships, often with fellow political activists; to make public the violence, organize and mobilise themselves in order to defend their rights, giving a meaning to their lives related to their convictions and the political struggle for the Sahrawi people; and to participate in women's associations. Only a small proportion refer to having had the opportunity of psychological support. Lastly, a minority have chosen to stay silent as a mechanism for survival.

> *My faith helped me a great deal, and the strength of my grandmother and my children helped me. The thread that kept me alive, that flaming torch, was my children.*
>
> *I have had the support of my family and the Sahrawi people. I spent a lot of time in hospitals; there have been many operations, but thank God,*

with the support of my family and neighbours we have been able to make progress.

I have never been happy, but since I started to belong to the associations I am stronger, with more courage to continue working in something I like and that helps in my people's struggle.

Now I feel stronger, to fight and disclose all that has happened to us helps me a great deal when it comes to overcoming it. Although psychologically I am not totally better, every time I remember those four hellish years [of enforced disappearance] tears come to my eyes. (...) I have not had any psychological support; my only psychologist is my conviction and my resistance.

Thank God I have had psychological treatment and little by little I have been recovering, but unfortunately the repercussions are still occurring and some of them will be with me for the rest of my life, since they have no cure and your head cannot forget them.

Based on what has been set out here, and bearing in mind the fact that repression and impunity in occupied Western Sahara continue to aggravate and deepen the harm caused, we consider it necessary for international cooperation and solidarity to contribute to activating mechanisms to mitigate this harm and to improve the welfare of Sahrawi women, both as direct victims of the violence and/or relatives of people who have been killed, disappeared or imprisoned. Below we offer a proposal for actions oriented at this goal, which we link directly with the victims' right of reparation. This is a proposal inspired by ideas contained in the testimonies of women and in their own strategies for coping and survival, given that these strategies are both a source of learning and a way of calling for greater international commitment to censuring the occupation. It is also a proposal that takes into consideration the limitations involved in the ban on entering occupied Western Sahara imposed by Morocco on foreigners involved in international solidarity, and which renders it necessary to seek adapted formulas for support.

- **Strengthen spaces for mutual support among women**. Mutual support has been and continues to be one of the practices for solidarity among women to help them persevere in the midst of violence. For example, during the flight to the desert and the aerial bombardments

after the occupation, there were women who took care of children whose families had been killed, detained or had disappeared. Furthermore, in circumstances of imprisonment and torture, the women have sought ways of supporting each other and surviving situations of extreme violence. Another more recent experience of mutual support was the creation of the *Casa de las Mujeres* ("Women's House"), a meeting place that activists started up in occupied Laayoune in 2014[6]. This space was conceived as a place for carrying out a range of activities including: political education, the work of historical memory, learning IT and languages, talking about the political violence that they suffer (including matters such as sexual violence), relaxing, meditating, doing "psychological exercises", gym, learning to speak in public and political activism techniques, as well as organizing cultural activities such as theatre, poetry, film, dance, learning about other cultures in the world, etc. (Arrizabalaga and Eizmendi, 2014).

The *Casa de las Mujeres* was only running for a short time, since Moroccan repression (involving constant surveillance of the place, the harassment of women who came to it and, finally, threats to and extortion of the property's owner) made it impossible for it to continue. However, it came out from the testimony of the women interviewed that its operation as a space for mutual support had beneficial effects. The state of permanent tension and alert, harassment by the police and soldiers, political, family and/or work responsibilities, the physical and psychological harm accumulated, among others, are factors that strongly condition their lives. For this reason, the women interviewed indicated that, at the *Casa de las Mujeres*, the atmosphere of trust created among them made it possible to talk about difficult experiences –which some had not shared or heard before–, from their past and present under the occupation. In this regard, they evaluated it as very positive to have a place and a time for them, to be able to talk about and share their experiences, and to get together and work on matters decided on by themselves in a collective manner.

6 This initiative was contributed to by the Basque Network of Solidarity with Sahrawi Women, which had previously supported the creation of *Casas de las Mujeres* in the Tindouf camps, and which are run by the National Union of Sahrawi Women as spaces for education, debate and reflection.

We consider that this kind of space contributes to letting Sahrawi women cope more easily with the violence, giving them an instrument for individual and group empowerment, for the following reasons: a) to reinforce the links among them and construct a collective identity; b) to support their capacity to express what they have experienced, often felt as "inexpressible" as a result of the trauma; c) to help in the identification of common patterns of violence among them, even when each experience is and should be treated as unique; d) to contribute to breaking the silence around sexual violence, a matter that is difficult to tackle and which particularly requires an atmosphere of safety, trust and collective care; e) faced with repression, to strengthen the women in their determination and political conviction; f) to increase the self-perception of their strength, value and strategic role in the Sahrawi resistance, as well as the enormous sacrifice made by them; and g) to help find a balance among political work, building a social network and preserving mental health. Given the importance of a place of this kind, international cooperation and solidarity can make a commitment to recover and start up spaces for mutual support among women. Bearing in mind that any action of this kind will be subject to persecution by the Moroccan authorities, it is necessary to assess the risks for the Sahrawi activists and give full priority to their decisions regarding the times, forms and places for initiatives.

- **Work on intergenerational links.** Just as in the case of mutual support, another mechanism for support among women is related to the strengthening of intergenerational links. This "alliance" between young and adult women is based on the mutual recognition of the experiences they have lived through and their common place in the resistance in the face of the occupation. It is frequently the case that young women express their admiration for older women (whether relatives or not) who are well-known defenders of the Sahrawi cause, for their bravery, their strength in the face of situations of considerable violence, and their constant support for their family members who have suffered from reprisals. It is also the case that adult and older women receive with hope the participation of the new generations and assume a responsibility in the transmission to these younger women of the legitimacy of the cause and the spirit of the Sahrawi struggle, in order to stop it becoming exhausted or being abandoned.

From the perspective of international cooperation and solidarity, the challenge with regard to the younger generations is a double one. Firstly, it is necessary to get to know the ways in which intergenerational transmission of the collective trauma is happening, given that young people are affected not only by the present violence which affects them directly, but also because of the indirect impacts of the repression suffered by their families. This would help to set down the foundations for psychosocial support actions that take into consideration and help to reduce their load of suffering. Secondly, the example of mutual recognition among young and adult women should be a call to us, as a task for international solidarity, to collaborate in transmitting the collective memory of the Sahrawi people's struggle for independence, in such a way that the new generations can recognize themselves as part of it, and continue it.

- **Politicize the harm.** The Sahrawi women express a powerful awareness of the collective effects of the political violence, given its extent and everyday nature. In this regard, it is important for them to express the fact that their cases are not isolated, but are similar to those undergone by many other Sahrawi people and families. By situating themselves within the collective harm, they frame their experience within a wider social and political context, which contributes to them being able to resignify the violence and suffering they have undergone. By politicizing their experience and keeping a strong political identity and commitment, many of them stop fear from paralyzing them. In this way, they transform their suffering into dissident action that they give a political, ethical and dignifying meaning to and, which, in the end, is an encouragement to them.

  Certainly, their political resistance and activism do not fully or automatically replace the need to process the traumas resulting from the losses of loved ones and the physical and psychological sufferings undergone. From a general point of view, the testimonies show the importance of offering international support which: one, maintains the perspective of the collective dimension of the harm caused and avoids an individualization in attention to the psychosocial problems identified; and, two, adopts a political and not only a humanitarian

focus, in the sense that a position be taken with regard to the legitimacy of the Sahrawi cause.

- **Tackle both the consequences and the causes of the violence.** Nowhere in the world are human rights violations the end goal of those responsible for them, but rather they are the means for achieving other objectives. In occupied Western Sahara, the Moroccan regime's violence is aimed at two essential goals: to maintain the occupation and impede the free determination of the Sahrawi people, and to obtain profits by means of the illegal exploitation of national resources and through trading in the goods produced in the occupied territories.

  In their testimonies, the Sahrawi women constantly make the link between the violence they suffer and the ultimate goals that this is for. This explains that, when asked about their demands for reparation for the damage suffered, the majority state that the main measures of reparation and non-repetition are independence, the end of the occupation and the recovery of their territory. Other measures that they express are trials for those responsible for the violence, the return of the refugee population and the liberation of political prisoners. Therefore, the work of international cooperation and solidarity aimed at supporting these demands is not only in accordance with our shared responsibility for solving the conflict, but also because it has a direct and positive effect on the well-being and reparation of victims who have survived violence.

- **Facilitate educational action.** As we have seen, Moroccan repression has had a considerable impact on the educational and job opportunities of the Sahrawi women. Since many of them have been forced to abandon their studies and with few or no options for joining the workforce and a greater presence in unstable jobs, their social and economic rights are seriously violated. All this has an impact on their life projects and their educational and job aspirations, their personal development and the economic security. With a great deal of effort, some women try to take up their education again or continue it on their own, outside the Moroccan educational system (for example, by means of private classes or through self-learning language classes). Others have not managed to do this, due to their family responsibilities and/or financial difficulties.

Education appears in the interviews as a strategic interest of the women and as part of their demands for socio-economic reparation for the damage suffered. In this regard, international cooperation and solidarity can support the educational processes of Sahrawi activists within the framework of an agenda that supports integrated reparation. Given the context of the occupation, education can be carried out either via virtual means, or outside the country for variable periods of time. It is important that content includes, among other things, specializations in psychosocial attention in cases of political violence, so that those who specialize in this way can build their skills in order to support other women in the occupied territories, with appropriate adaptation of this training to their setting and culture. In fact, with regard to the reparation of Sahrawi victims of serious human rights violations, the women interviewed propose measures for the prevention of violence, protection, psychosocial attention and memory, aspects that can, in part, be tackled by means of educational actions.

- **Promote solidarity among women's movements.** For Sahrawi women, another of the needs and strategic commitments has been to open up and maintain communication channels and relationships of solidarity with institutions and associations in other countries, including women's and feminist organizations. In this case, an example is the integration of the National Union of Sahrawi Women into the World March of Women (WMW), one of the most important branches of the international feminist movement, which brings together organizations and groups from around the world. Among other actions, in 2013 the WMW ratified the annual celebration, every year on the 18th of February, of a day of solidarity and action in support of the struggle of the women of Western Sahara.

  In our experience of cooperation with Sahrawi women in the areas of historical memory and human rights, it has been interesting for them to share aspects of actions by women against impunity and in favour of the rights to truth, justice and reparation in other countries around the world, such as Guatemala and Colombia. In this regard, we consider that the analyses carried out with an international and comparative perspective make it possible to observe, over and above the special characteristics of each context, similar elements in the patterns of violence, its effects

and the requirements in terms of support and psychosocial care for women survivors of political violence. In this way, the exchange of experiences and learnings among women's movements in different places can facilitate: a) the appearance of internationalist actions and expressions of solidarity and b) the creation of joint strategies of greater visibility, strength and impact in the psychosocial support of human rights defenders and victims who have survived violence.

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